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ABSTRACT

According to the theory of Piaget, until the age of two the chief developmental factor of a child is the permanence of an object or the ability to retain mental images. Between two and six he begins to use mental images, and as he develops the ability to retain a mental image he begins to imitate things from the past which he has seen or experienced. At this point, the 8mm motion picture film could be used to assist children in moving from sensorimotor reactions to deferred imitation preparatory to the process of learning. Films of themselves would present an image which is abstract, and in order to solve this contradiction children would proceed to a higher level of thinking. Such films may provide a basis for helping children develop language concepts, understand processes, organizine experience, classify objects, and improve visual literacy. (Author/DS)

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PIAGET, SUPER 8mm, AND PRESCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

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Although the four developmental stages promulgated by Piaget - sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational - are well known, the salient characteristics of each stage may not be completely understood. This is especially true of the sensorimotor stage. Until the child reaches approximately the age of two years Piaget states that the chief developmental factor is not language but permanence of the object. This concerns the ability of the child to retain mental images. For the child in the early months of life the saying "out of sight, out of mind" is literally true. Learning consists totally of sensorimotor experiences which the child is assimilating into patterns called "schemas". As he accomodates to new experiences and assimilates these experiences into schemas, intellectual growth is taking place. This is evidenced by the fact that around the last half of this stage the child begins to look for an object which is no longer visible. Because he is now capable of retaining a mental image the child has made an important developmental step toward abstract thinking.

As the child progresses into the preoperational stage, approximately 2-6 years, he moves from acting only upon objects which he can directly perceive to the use of mental symbols..

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This transition toward the use of mental symbols begins in the sensorimotor stage and becomes complete when the child is capable of abstract thinking in the final, formal operational stage (11-12 years). It is important that representational materials follow this developmental pattern. S8mm films made of children engaged in sensorimotor activities help to translate real experiences into representational experiences, since they closely imitate in color and motion the actual experience.

As the child develops the ability to retain a mental image he begins to imitate things from the past which he has seen or experienced. Piaget calls this "deferred imitation", and considers it vital to further development, since it indicates that the child is internalizing his visual and auditory experiences.

In assisting the child to move from sensorimotor reactions to deferred imitation the motion picture can be an effective agent since it switches the child from direct perceptual experience (as he watches the film) to recalled experience (when the film is turned off). It also acts as an agent to challenge his thinking, which moves the child from equilibrium into disequilibrium. In a state of disequilibrium the child utilizes assimilation and accomodation to bring himself back into equilibrium. It is this process which we call "learning".

One characteristic of preschool children is their egocentrism. They feel that they are the center of the universe and are unable to adjust to any other point of view which differs from their own. When they see themselves in a

film this strengthens the ego and makes them feel important. However, it also helps them to see themselves in a more objective way. At times they are unable to identify the person on the screen as themselves and are incredulous when told who it is. This may throw them out of equilibrium with regard to their animistic beliefs. Since inanimate things are considered to have animate characteristics (the sun follows me, the moon looks at me, etc.) preschool children believe that the moving objects on the screen are alive. When a child sees himself, however, he is thrown into confusion. Who is that person up there that looks like me and acts like me but can't be me because I am sitting here watching? When a child becomes aware of a contradiction and works to resolve it he is proceeding toward a higher level of thinking.

Since preoperational children are still involved in a predominately sensorimotor world, films made of them may offer a better transition to representatilnal thinking than still pictures. Language is at its peak of development from 2-4 years, and films of children in familiar activities provide excellent vehicles for discussion. Children will often substitute a physical gesture for a word they cannot remember, e.g., they will frequently duck their heads rather than use the word "dive".

Films may be used for specific language needs such as connecting spatial relationships to language. Prepositions are especially difficult for young children to use correctly, and by using a film which shows them manipulating objects

over, under, in, around, etc., they achieve practice in using these terms. It should be emphasized that the films must be made of the children themselves involved in these activities in order to connect the sensorimotor and representational stages. The use of commercial films with children who had not experienced the activities in the film would be antithetical to Piaget's philosophy. Piaget asserts that the child learns through interaction with his environment, not by a stimulus-response process.

Preschool children have little conception of part-whole relationships. In cooking they consider only the list of ingredients, not the amount of each necessary for a proper product. They also have difficulty understanding any sequential activity. A film made of the children cooking may provide opportunities for sequential analysis as well as a discussion of part-whole relationships. Films of cooking also offer examples of transformations such a batter transformed into pancakes, sugar and juice into jelly, etc.

Even though children may understand a process as it builds step by step they are not able to reverse this process. Films may be used to show a process building and then reversing if a projector with a reverse speed is available. Asking children to anticipate the next step in the process demands the use of mental imagery. It is the ability to combine present and past which makes the use of films so effective. The projector can be stopped at any time and past action discussed or the coming action can be anticipated.

Another essential process in mental development is the ability to organize experience. Films taken on field trips may help children recall the outstanding events of the trip, again combining mental images and language.

Classification is a skill of higher mental development which may be encouraged by films made in the child's own environment. Pets, children, zoo animals, cars, boats, etc., make good subjects for such films.

Preoperational children do not have the background of experience to always interpret correctly what they see in films, so films which might lead to erroneous conclusions should be avoided. Young children literally believe what they see, since they have not yet developed the process of logical thought. Causality does not have to be logical to them since magic is a sufficient explanation for the physical world around them. Because the child's own actions and experiences form the basis of his schemas he may distort new information to fit his own point of view, therefore the use of any representational material must be used with caution at this age.

S8mm films in color are highly motivating to children, especially those of themselves or familiar places. They act as a transition from the sensorimotor stage to the beginnings of mental symbolism. They allow for a wide range of subject matter and are easily shown on inexpensive, easy-to-operate projectors. Visual literacy is an important aspect of preoperational development and should be emphasized in every early childhood curriculum.

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